

Botswana's Vanguard Women Leaders



Succeeding Against All Odds

In National Women's History Month the U.S. Embassy is honored to recognize five extraordinary Botswana who shine brighter than the rest -- and who happen to be women.



We honor **Gaositwe Chiepe**, who helped build the school system before rising to serve in no less than four different ministerial portfolios -- including the Ministry of Minerals and Mines, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Representing Botswana in tough international negotiations, Dr. Chiepe often found herself the only woman at the table.



We honor **Linah Mohohlo**, who through hard work and perseverance rose to become Governor of the Bank of

Botswana, and who has been twice named Best Central Bank Governor for Africa and the Middle East. Ms. Mohohlo looked to her family and to international women leaders to help inspire her to greatness.



We honor her mophato sister, **Mosadi Seboko**, who shattered centuries of tradition by being chosen the first woman paramount chief of the Balete. She recently chose not to stand for re-election as the head of the House of Chiefs to devote more time to her community and her people. Although Kgosi Seboko lost her father when she was very young, she is proud today to walk in his footsteps.



We honor **Banu Khan**, a physician and the first head of the National AIDS Co-

ordinating Agency, who is at the very center of Botswana's battle against HIV/AIDS. Few understand better the human, social and economic costs of the epidemic to Botswana. Few work harder to move Botswana towards the Vision 2016 goal of an AIDS-free generation.



We honor author and legal expert **Unity Dow**. As an author she writes emotionally compelling novels about difficult topics including AIDS and ritual murder. As an activist she successfully challenged the law that restricted a Motswana woman's ability to transmit her nationality to her children. As a High Court Justice she presses every lawyer who comes before her to do their best -- but especially the women.

In any country, in any age, these people would stand out for their dedication and their vision. That they have achieved so much should inspire us all. That they have done so as women should give every girl reason to believe she, too, can reach for the stars.



Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe

To be a vanguard leader means to be at the forefront of change. **Dr. Gaositwe Chiepe** has been the first woman to do many things -- and she has done them all very well, starting even as girl in primary school.

"I was a good student, and my teachers were very proud of me," Dr. Chiepe remembers, "particularly one teacher who had me as his show piece. Of course I had to do my best." There was another reason to work hard in school. "My mother was very keen on my getting an education. After my father's death this cousin wanted me to leave school because I was educated enough to write my name when I got married. I didn't want to leave school and my mother said no way. So I had to make sure I gave them no reason to make me leave."

Dr. Chiepe went on to be one of the first girls to attend Tigerkloof School, near Vry-

burg, South Africa. "It was frightening to leave home and go so far away. Tigerkloof, which is maybe three hours from here now, took a whole night by train, so it was very far. The biggest challenge was when, in my second year, I was made a prefect. I was so scared I used to hide. I suppose I was chosen because the authorities at the school felt I could

"My favorite Setswana saying means 'No man is an island.' You need other people to succeed."

do it, and I took the challenge. I had to do nothing but my best."

Dr. Chiepe inherited her father's determination, worked harder than anyone else, and learned to be confident -- all key factors in her lifetime of achievement. She became the first woman to

represent the newly-independent Botswana overseas as an ambassador. She then became Botswana's first female cabinet officer -- and the first woman in independent Africa to serve as foreign minister. In total she was minister on four different occasions, serving in Commerce, Mines and Minerals, Education, and Foreign Affairs. Issues crucial to Botswana's future were in her capable hands, including the education of youth, the expansion of diamond mining, and relations with apartheid South Africa.

Her secret? "Believe in yourself. Be proud of what you are. Don't depend on somebody else for success -- your father, your brother, your husband. Be yourself. My professor used to say, 'What one fool can do another can.' If any human being can do something, don't think without trying that you can't do it simply because you are a woman."

Mokoduwe go tsosiwa o o itsosang



Bank of Botswana Governor Linah Mohohlo has worked her way up the ladder to achieve international recognition as the finest Central Bank Governor in Africa. She told us that "Mokoduwe go tsosiwa o o itsosang" is her favorite Setswana saying. In English it means, "God helps those who help themselves".

Q: You hold a key position in the Government of Botswana. Your work has been recognized internationally. Yours is the model of a successful career. What would you consider the key ingredients that went into your success?

A: First and foremost, I have to admit that I am extremely humbled by the implication of your questions and wish to thank you for it. My relative professional success is mainly due to determination and perseverance, even in the face of adversity. And also, there has been a dose of ambition within appropriately targeted and directed benchmarks. The reason I am using the word "dose" is because one has to be very careful about being overly ambitious, and setting benchmarks which may not be achievable, due to the fact that excessive ambition can lead to disgruntlement when targets are not met.

Q: How would you describe your childhood home? How important was it in determining which path you would follow in life?

A: My home in the village (Ramotswa) was simply a basic average Setswana home. At the time there were three rondavels, a relatively large one and two smaller ones. To sum it up, I did not grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth. But I was exposed to what I consider the best values of life. I believe I was fortunate to have two great role models in my mother and grandmother who were inspirational in more ways than one. My mother was an epitome of a woman; she had a full time job and still discharged her household chores very efficiently. She was simply great and very hard working. My grandmother, who stepped in effectively as a guardian, did not go to school herself, but always emphasized the importance of acquiring education.

Q: Do you think that young people these days have it easier, to make their way into a career, into the world, or is it more difficult?

A: The answer is yes and no – indeed there are pros and cons associated with being young these days. Yes, because there are many opportunities and career choices. As a result they can pick and choose, whereas we could only aspire to be either teachers or perhaps nurses at best. There were very few people who aspired to be doctors for instance because of inherent limitations. There wasn't even a university in the country and only very few people went to study at universities abroad.

With respect to the "No" part of the answer: there are too many temptations, in the same way that there are all these multiple opportunities open to them. Examples include mobile phones, mainline telephones, television, motor vehicles, etc. In contrast, when I was a little girl in Ramotswa, I think there was one telephone in the entire village. And I wonder how many times it was functional. Unfortunately, there is also the HIV/AIDS pandemic and this is worsened by those who engage in unprotected sex despite constant advice and warning. I hope this calamity can be redressed soon.

Q: Would you have any advice for young woman starting out on their careers?

A: Yes – I wish to advise young women to constantly acquire education and to learn to distinguish between what they need and what they want. They need to determine well targeted and measured goals and work hard at achieving them. At the same time they need to be patient, as Rome was not built in a day.

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Mabogo Dinku a Thebana

"In Unity There is Strength"

Dr. Banu Khan is at the center of Botswana's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As the first director of the National AIDS Coordinating Agency (NACA), she has to make sure that all ministries, non-governmental organizations and international donors work together to maximize prevention, treatment and care. She speaks at kgotla meetings and international conferences about the HIV/AIDS challenge in Botswana. Her job requires her to be expert on the human, economic and social costs of the virus. But her goal is to save lives.

Saving lives is what brought her to medicine in the first place. "Around about the age of nine I saw my mother who was quite ill and suffering from TB," says Banu Khan. "I'm the eldest child of the family so I started to nurse her. I also started to admire the doctors who were making her better. So that was my motivation for wanting to not only make her better but other people too."

But not everyone supported her desire to enter medicine. Banu Khan remembers, "I had a lot of people try to persuade me that I shouldn't become a doctor. They

thought I should take up suitable profession so that if I got married and it didn't work out, I could resort to sewing or cooking. But I persevered."

She went on to study at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Returning to Botswana, she joined the staff at Princess Marina Hospital, but it wasn't enough. Banu Khan founded the Society for Women Against AIDS Botswana Branch, and the Botswana Network of AIDS Service Organizations. Both are now strong partners in the HIV/AIDS effort.

"I believe it is important to believe in yourself, and to believe that we are all made equal."

"My commitment is to saving lives, and this commitment is key to my success." Banu Khan speaks slowly to emphasize her words. "I bring to this job a lot of passion. I believe in what we are doing, and it drives me to do the best I can."

For all women, Banu Khan says, "It is important to believe in yourself and to believe we are all made equal. It is within us to challenge ourselves. To have a dream and to go for that dream. Have a plan, work hard, persevere and you will make it."



A Liberated Person

In every aspect of her life Unity Dow has been a force for change. As an activist she banded with others to help create Emang Basadi, Women Against Rape, the Women in Law Society, BOCONGO and other non-governmental groups. As an attorney she challenged the law that allowed only men to convey their Botswana citizenship to their children -- thanks to her women can too. As an author she has written novels about difficult issues like IV/AIDS and ritual murder. As the first Motswana woman on the High Court, she holds all lawyers -- but especially women -- to the same high standards she sets for herself.

Unity Dow sweeps the braids off her shoulders and leans forward to make a point. "I never thought of myself as a liberated woman -- I thought of myself as a liberated person. I grew up in a household where my mother had a sewing machine, a Singer sewing machine, and we hated it. We hated it because she made all our clothes. We never had store-bought clothes. But today everybody in my family can sew -- including the boys. If a pocket came off your pants and you were a boy -- you sewed it on. You didn't give it to the girl and say 'Do it for me.' If I was cooking and I needed firewood I had to chop the firewood. So we grew up in a family where chores were not separated between male and female at all. My brothers hauled water, my brothers cooked, and I chopped wood. There was never a sense that you can't do this because you are female, you can only do this because you are male."

"Once I was outside the protection of my family I found myself confronting barriers all the time. When I went to Swaziland -- because I went to Swaziland for my law degree -- we traveled by bus. I was 18 years old, amongst all males because all the peo-

ple in my class, my law school class, were boys. This young man made a comment about women, a disparaging remark and I said from the back "Who's that with the 14th century mentality?" And of course he hated me for all five years of law school."

"Once I came back from law school, there were people like Athalia Molokomme who made me get involved organizationally in these issues as opposed to being involved personally in these issues. We co-founded Emang Basadi under her leadership, we co-founded Women in Law, we co-founded Women Against Rape. We definitely had a core group of people who were willing to sacrifice their time to make a difference and I think that was really really important."

"Women need to know that it is ok for them to challenge traditions that have been there for years. What they bring to the world of work is really a new perspective and that perspective has the right to be heard. They're not always right, but they have a right to articulate what it is they believe should be changed without thinking its always been like this and therefore it must continue to be like that."

Mokoduwe go tsosiwa o o itsosang



The whole world took notice when Mosadi Seboko was enthroned as the first woman paramount chief in Botswana. "This has been possible only because of the bravery of the men and women in the Bamalete territory," Kgosi says. "They did not fear change, and they found it just to break from what had become to be taken as a norm -- that bogosi was exclusively for men." Though her father who was the Chief passed away at a young age, she did not lose hope but took it upon herself to help her mother raise her siblings. This challenge at a younger age was to help her in life as she raised her own family and assumed the leadership of her community.

To be a chief, Kgosi Seboko says, "It is a hereditary leadership position, or as it is presently in Botswana we have a House of Chiefs where we have those chiefs specially elected according to the Botswana Constitution. To be a good chief, one needs to have "Botho". Botho is a concept, it is humanness for everybody. One has to have leadership skills, have integrity and be humble. They also have to be respectful to other people if they are to be respected in return. You need to have the interests of the community at heart and have time for the people you interact with."

Kgosi Seboko continues, "My role as a traditional leader is yes, to preserve our traditions and cultures that serve the community well. But if there is anything that may be harmful or oppressive about our tradition it is provided for in our constitution to change or replace it. It is important to understand that tradition/culture is not static."

Traditional, modern or somewhere in between -- one thing never changes. "Women have to work hard and not expect success to come on a silver platter," says Kgosi Seboko. "It is only through their diligence and hard work, making sure that they perform to their best abilities, that they will be rewarded. The achievement of other women should serve as an inspiration to be the best they can be in what they do. I think young women should be able to recognize and avoid peer pressure as well. They should avoid getting into debt, living beyond their means. They should be vigilant about those who would take advantage of them with promises of taking care of them, for example. They must aspire to acquire economic empowerment and look after themselves."

Kgosi Seboko is championing a number of community projects including a cooperative bakery for women, a horticulture initiative and a mixed group -- regiment project.